Belle Trimble-Quiz

History of English Language

Knowledge Fair

**American Accents Presentation Summary**

This project is based on the variation of accents within the United States. Linguistically, there are two meanings for the term accent. The first meaning is that which comes to mind for many people when they heard the word accent, which is ‘foreign accent’. A foreign accent appears when a person speaks a language using the rules or sounds of another language—often their native tongue—and results in native speakers perceiving the sounds as wrong or ‘foreign’. The other type of accent is defined by the way that a group of people speak their native language. This is determined by where the person lives and to which social group they belong. In this sense, everyone has an accent.

The research for this project involved looking at the surveys that are used when trying to find out which American accent a person speaks. I took the words that were used in these surveys due to their different pronunciations. In addition to these words, I took input from native speakers to compile a list of 30 words that typically vary among American English speakers. I then reached out to a group of American students studying abroad in Taiwan during the current semester for volunteers to record their pronunciation of these words. I got a response from nine students. I asked these students to record themselves saying these words in this order: Mary, Caramel, Pajamas, Fill, Potato, Been, Cot, Lawyer, Pen, Caller, Aunt, Stalk, Crayon, Tomato, Merry, Water, Coupon, Dawn, Caught, Pin, Stock, Collar, Horrible, Marry, Feel, About, Bag, Salmon, Pecan, Moist. I asked the students to make a slight pause between each word, as well as tell me the name of the city (and state) with which they most closely identify. From this pool of students I received recordings from eight students. From these eight students I was able to process five of the students sound files from the group, in addition to my own. For the presentation I chose six words to compare: Caramel, Pajamas, Lawyer, Crayon, Bag, and Pecan.

One purpose of this project was to create a survey of voices from a similar age group. The other purpose was to the compare the data with that of previous studies and analyze how the distributions compare. I compared the samples that I collected and their distribution to the Harvard Dialect Survey (HDS). I found matches between my data and that of the HDS for the words Carmel, Pajamas, Lawyer and Bag. This may in part be due to the fact that the Harvard Dialect Survey does show a variety of pronunciations even for the same area of the United States. My results differed for the word Crayon in that I believe two of my speakers’ pronunciation sounds more like “cray-ann”, a two-syllable word with [æ], which is not represented in the HDS. Another word of interest is Pecan, which matches many places including San Francisco, Delmar, and other “Pick Ahn” places. Cincinnati matches, but one might expect the “kahn” pronunciation to be more likely. Again there is a pronunciation found in my speakers not represented by the HDS, “PICK Ahn”, in which the first syllable is stressed. I believe this speaker, Northfield, contrasts with the other “Pick Ahn” speakers.

In conclusion, my research found both similarities between the young American speakers’ pronunciations and that of the Harvard Dialect Survey, as well as some differences, with the Northfield and Golden speakers. Finally, I would like to express my immense gratitude to all of the participants in my research.

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